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ABSTRACT

At the Rochester Institute of Technology, a course was created which took students out of the traditional classroom setting in order to teach small group communication in an experiential-adventure based format. The course was designed by a faculty member in Communications and the Coordinator of Outdoor Experiential Education. Based on a survey of 10 small group communication textbooks, 10 topics were selected for the course: communication models, group development, cohesion, norms, verbal and nonverbal communication, decision making, leadership, roles, conflict and competition, and empathy and trust. These topics were approached using assigned reading, short quizzes, brief lectures and class discussions, a research paper, and experiential activities--many of them adventure-based--taking place at a facility on campus known as the Red Barn, run by the Outdoor Experiential Education Program. Each activity was designed to reflect concepts related to small group communication. This experiential approach to teaching small group communication seemed to be effective and popular. The combination of a thorough plan, strategic sequencing of materials, clearly structured experiences, and frequent discussions relating the experiences to the subject matter is essential if these techniques are to be used successfully. This course has remained popular in its second and third offerings. (Eighteen references are attached.) (SR)

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SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION:

AN EXPERIENTIAL-ADVERTURE BASED FORMAT

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The small group communication course has become a staple in many communication departments. Warnemunde (1986) defines these types of courses as ones "which emphasize communication dimensions in the small group setting" (p. 395) and can be taught using a variety of instructional techniques. This paper reports a unique method of teaching the principles of small group communication. Broken into three areas this paper will present a brief overview of instructional practices currently being used by surveyed instructors (Warnemunde, 1986), a synthesis of the major areas focused on in ten small group communication text books, and a detailed description of how these major areas were examined using an experiential-adventure based approach to teaching small group communication.

Warnemunde (1986) studied the status of small group communication courses and asked "What pedagogical approaches are being used?" (p. 389). The results of his survey found that the most frequently used techniques were lectures followed by examinations and a variety of group projects. "Excluding the traditional methods of lectures and examinations" (p. 393), instructional method which give the student practical, hands-on experiences into the dynamics of group interaction are favored. Instructional techniques for the small group communication classroom can be broken down into task categories. Cooper (1988) discusses problem-solving tasks, role-playing tasks, research tasks, and games/simulation tasks. All of these methods allow students to evaluate themselves and others using information and

guidelines discussed in class and/or assigned in textbook or outside readings. While these techniques may minimize the amount of time an instructor has to develop discussions on course content, they are favored "because they permit students to gain practical experience in group interaction" (Warnemunde, 1986, p. 393). It is possible that an instructor may become careless in the design of a class agenda by assigning tasks or structured experiences without clear and thoroughly planned relationships between the experiential elements and the theoretical and research content of the small group communication course. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for an instructor to have a firm grasp of the course content, a clear understanding of the instructional tasks contemplated for inclusion in the course, and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to create clear and practical relationship between the two.

At the Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York, a faculty member from the Professional and Technical Communication Degree Program and the Coordinator of Outdoor Experiential Education combined their interests and ideas concerning group communication, group dynamics, team building, and individual self-esteem to create a course which takes students out of the traditional classroom setting in order to teach small group communication. Before the course was designed, ten small group communication textbooks were reviewed (Baird & Weinberg, 1981; Beebe & Masterson, 1986; Cathcart & Samovar, 1988; Cragan & Wright, 1986; Fisher, 1980; Jones, Barnlund, &

Haiman, 1980; Mabry & Barnes, 1980; Napier & Gershenfeld, 1985; Tubbs, 1984; Verderber, 1982). These textbook revealed many areas of small group communication which received considerable attention from each texts' authors, co-authors, or editors. Ten of these areas were selected then refined and organized (an organization which reflected the order in most of the reviewed textbooks) for the course. The areas were as follows: 1) communication models; 2) group development; 3) cohesion; 4) norms; 5) verbal and nonverbal communication; 6) decision making; 7) leadership; 8) roles; 9) conflict and competition, and; 10) empathy and trust.

Theses topics are approach from four angles. First, students are assigned relevant reading from the course text book and from outside sources. Second, short quizzes test the students on thier grasp of the materials. Third, short lectures and class discussion serve to reinforce teh material and clear up any misconceptions or confusion. Fourth, experiential activities are run with the goal of giving the students hands-on experiences with the information covered in the previous three approaches. Many of these experiential activities are adventure-based: "an approach to physical [and psychological] activity which combines a joyful sense of adventure, a willingness to move beyond previously set limits and the satisfaction of solving problems together [in groups]" (Project Adventure, 1977, p. 5).

First, <u>communication models</u> are discussed during the initial class session. This session is held in the classroom which

appeared on the students schedules. This meeting serves as an orientation to the class agenda, and a chance for the students to interact in the expected educational environment. This lecture/discussion of communication models begins with the Shannon and Weaver S-M-C-R model, progresses through the Belro's personality variables model and Dance's helix model and concludes with Barnlund's conception of the model of transactional communication. These models serve as a foundation for the course work to follow; especially important are the ideas of personal perceptions, assumptions, verbal and nonverbal communication, empathy and trust, and the issue of intentionality of communication as these areas receive attention later in the course.

The second area to receive attention is group development. Again various models and theories of group development are discussed in a traditional classroom setting. This gives the class a frame of reference by which they can track the development of their class as a group and their smaller task groups throughout the course. Also early in the course several other topics are introduced: trust, leadership, and norms. These three area, combined with group development give the class a choice of four topic areas to research for a final paper and presentation. The class is broken into four groups of five students and one research topic is selected by each group.

Now that the groups of five have selected their topics, the third major area is focused upon. Cohesion, "the ability of the

group to stick together" (Bormann & Bormann, 1988, p. 55) is an essential ingredient for the successful functioning of a task group. Each task group discusses the attitudes and behaviors of a good group member with the goal of cohesion in mind. After a thorough discussion, each tack group is instructed to create a "Small Group Membership Contract" (Neumann, 1988) which specifies the attitudes and behaviors members are to expect of one another. These expected attitudes and behaviors can evolve into norms, the fourth area of course content. A discussion of norms, how they are created, how they can be changes, how they affect the functioning of a group, and how they can help or hinder the cohesion process is generated. Soon after, each member agrees on the contract, signs it, and turns it into the instructor.

From this point on, the class no longer meets in the class room; rather it meets at a facility on campus know as The Red Barn. The Red Barn is, in fact, a red barn which was renovated by the Outdoor Experiential Education Program and used as a location to run team building and self-esteem raising workshops for the campus and community. Following an "Outward-bound" type of philosophy, The Red Barn puts groups in situations where they have to develop a level of trust and teamwork in order to accomplish a task. These task range from simply remembering people's names to having an entire group climb over a fifteen foot high vertical wall.

For this course, each activity at The Red Barn is designed or adapted to reflect various concepts related to small group

communication. As an exercise is introduced, the group of five students who have that topic as their research project are asked to observe the exercise and take notes for their research project.

The fifth area focused upon is verbal and nonverbal communication. An exercise called All-aboard (Project Adventure, 1977) calls for the class of twenty students to broken into two groups of ten. The groups then move to far areas of the barn where they can not see or easily hear each other. Each group is given a wood platform two feet by two feet square and tree inches high. Their task is to get all ten members of their group on the platform at one time; no one can have any part of their body on the floor and everyone must to have at least on part of their body on the platform. The task is different for each of the groups hereafter. One group can communicate in anyway they chose, the other group can only communicate nonverbally. After the groups complete their tasks, they begin to discuss the communication involved by focusing on the verbal/nonverbal issue.

After this discussion, the group then splits apart again and is assigned the task of creating a fantasy which can be used to introduce the exercise to a different group. The goal of this exercise is to have the students use their creativity to make up fictitious scenarios. This also serves to allow student to use language, metaphors, and delivery skills which will become useful for their final research presentation.

Decision-making is the sixth area to be covered. Techniques including brainstorming, nominal group technique (NGT), and the Delphi method are discussed. The apparent benefits and limitations of these techniques are focused upon, and brainstorming and the NGT are selected as the ones most useful for the classes purposes. The basic difference between these two methods is that in the NGT, the group silently generates ideas to create a master list and in brainstorming, the group verbally interacts to create their master list. The class is broken into four groups of five and are situated at the four corners in the barn. Two group are given a task to be solved using NGT, and the other two groups are given a task to solve the problem using brainstorming. Afterwards, the four groups unite to discuss their findings and then to process the interaction that took place.

The seventh and eighth areas of focus are leadership and roles. First a discussion of designated and emergent leadership and member roles commences. This discussion also includes various leadership styles, French and Raven's (1959) ideas of power, role formation, role conflict, and role strain. An exercise is used to illustrate the differences between leadership styles. This exercise is similar to the board game where there are fifteen hole, fourteen of which are filled with pegs. The object is, by jumping pegs and removing the one jumped, to have a board with only one peg remaining. In this exercise the holes are represented by bicycle tires and the pegs are people.

Different class members are selected to be leaders. The exercise is run three times; once with an autocratic leader, once with a democratic leader, and once with a laissez-faire leader. Afterwards, a class discussion focuses on these leadership styles and how they affected the group process and group member role emergence.

The affect of conflict and competition on group interaction is the ninth area of the course. An exercise that places one half the class against the other half of the class in head-to-head competition is called "The Trolley" (Project Adventure, 1977). Each group is supplied with two 4"x4" wood boards each 14 feet long. Each board has twelve pieces of rope, three feet long knotted into place inside of drilled holes each space one foot form the next. The task is for the group to cross forty feet of the barn floor without having any member touch any part of the ground with any part of their body at any time. The competition between the two teams can cause conflict within teams or even between teams. After the exercise is concluded, perceptions of competition and conflict are discussed.

Empathy and trust are the final areas focused upon in this course. Schutz's FIRO model which focuses on group members needs for inclusion, affection, and control is used as a springboard for this discussion (Schutz, 1958). The discussion leads into the ideas that trust will alleviate the "risk of feeling foolish, failing or in other ways becoming vulnerable to social judgement (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988, p. 14). A series of

exercises are used to focus on trust; these exercises progress from low risk elements to higher risk elements. It should be noted that all of the exercises are extremely safe if performed correctly, they just appear to be risky. The first exercise situates a group of ten people standing in a circle, facing in, with sides touching, and arms extended and palms out. A volunteer stands in the middle of the circle and is blindfolded. This person is instructed to fold their arms across their chest, hold their body rigid, keep their feet planted in on place on the floor, and to fall backwards. The people in the circle lightly push the person in the center back and forth, from side to side. As this process continues the circle may widen a bit, giving the volunteer a strange falling sensation. Members of the circle all get a chance to feel the sensation and develop trust in each other.

The next exercise, "The Trust Fall" situates all but one group member in two lines facing each other. These people extend their arms with their palms up forming a ladder of arms about four feet high and parallel to the ground. The volunteer member climbs onto a platform which is also four feet high. The volunteer faces away from the group and with body rigid and arms folded across the chest, falls back into the waiting arms of the group (Rohnke, 1984). It should be noted that a group of ten people, five facing five, can easily catch a 200 pound person.

The final trust activity is a solo adventure, but because of its height and apparent risk level, group support is necessary.

Located twenty five feet above the barn floor is a beam that spans two lofts. Half way across the span and ten feet out is a trapeze bar connected to two cables attached to the barn roof. The task is for the individual to climb a ladder to the loft, walk out on the beam, turn to the side and jump out in an attempt to grab the trapeze suspended twenty five feet above the barn floor. The whole time, the person is fitted with a body harness that is attached to a rope on a belay system. If the person falls or misses the trapeze, they are gently caught by the rope and lowered safely to the barn floor. This exercise is first approached with doubt and fear, but through group support and encouragement, it is attempted by many.

All of these trust-oriented exercises generate healthy discussions that deal with physical and psychological risk-taking in a variety of forums. The difference between healthy encouragement and disabling pressure is discussed, as are topic of self-esteem and goal setting.

Other activities are performed during the course; the ones presented in this paper are the most interesting and easiest to explain. In addition to these activities, frequent quizzes and short reaction papers are assigned. The last class period has each group present their twenty five page research papers which discusses theories and research supported by example observed at the barn.

Just how successful the course is is hard to say. It was the topic of a great deal of conversation and has become very

become very popular in its second and third offerings. Student evaluations yielded highly favorable results.

Experiential education techniques seem to be effective and popular methods of teaching small group communication. The combination of a thoroughly devised plan, strategic sequencing of materials, clearly structured experiences, and frequent discussions relating the experiences to the subject matter are essential if these techniques are to be successfully used.

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